Michael Puʻu at the 1984 U.S. Olympic Greco-Roman Wrestling Trials

A Living Archive Entry — Lived Experience University

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Category: Family History | Athletic Legacy | Racial Justice in Sport | Aliʻi Native Hawaiian Erasure?

The Record

On **June 8, 1984**, Michael Puʻu of Goleta, California competed in the **U.S. Olympic Greco-Roman Wrestling Trials — Final Qualifying Tournament** in Minneapolis, Minnesota, at the University of Minnesota, in the **136.5-pound weight class**.

His participation is documented in the **Sacramento Union** (Sacramento, California), published **Saturday, June 9, 1984, Page 34**, in a column reporting results of the tournament. The entry reads:

"136.5 — Desi McNelis, Baltimore, dec. Michael Puu, Goleta, Va., 12-0..."

(Note: "Goleta, Va." is a typographical error in the newspaper. Michael Puʻu was from Goleta, California — a community in the Santa Barbara area, where the Puʻu family was rooted.)

A second source — the **Bay City Times (Bay City, Michigan), Monday June 11, 1984, Page 18** — provides the complete top-six results for the Minneapolis qualifying tournament at 136.5 lbs:

1. John Hughes, Minneapolis
2. Dan Mello, Stafford, Va.
3. Abdurrahim Kuzu, Lincoln, Neb.
4. David Ray, Iowa City, Iowa
5. Dalen Wasmund, Apple Valley, Minn.
6. Desmond McNelis, Baltimore, Md.

Michael Puʻu is not among the top six. He finished outside the top six at the Minneapolis qualifying tournament and did not advance to the final trials at Allendale, Michigan. McNelis,

who defeated Michael 12-0, finished 6th and did advance. Kuzu finished 3rd in Minneapolis, then won at Allendale, and represented the United States at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

How the Selection Actually Worked

A second primary source — the **Argus Leader** (Sioux Falls, South Dakota), published June 9, 1984 — provides critical context about the selection process. Reporting on South Dakota natives Jim Scherr and Dennis Koslowski advancing, the article states:

"The top six wrestlers in each weight class qualified to go to a training camp in Michigan. At the camp, the top wrestler in each weight class and an alternate will be chosen for the Olympic team."

This is essential to understanding Michael Pu‘u's story. The selection process had **two distinct stages**:

Stage 1 — June 8, 1984, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota: A seeding tournament. The top six wrestlers per weight class advanced to the final trials in Michigan. This is where Michael Pu‘u competed and where the Sacramento Union documented his match against McNelis.

Stage 2 — June 16-23, 1984, Grand Valley State College Field House, Allendale, Michigan: The final Olympic trials. An advertisement in the **Grand Rapids Press (June 11, 1984)** gives the precise schedule:

- **Saturday June 16** — Special qualifying matches for 4th-place finishers from Minneapolis
- **Monday-Tuesday June 18-19** — Greco-Roman 136 lb preliminaries
- **Wednesday June 20** — Greco-Roman 136 lb finals — "Winners face the world in Los Angeles"

The Minneapolis Star Tribune (June 17, 1984) confirms the format: the top seed from Minneapolis waited while the other five wrestlers eliminated each other, then met the survivor in a best-two-out-of-three series for the Olympic spot.

The June 16 qualifying day is critically significant. It gave a second chance specifically to wrestlers who finished **4th place** in Minneapolis. Michael lost to McNelis but may have finished 4th overall — which would have brought him back to Allendale on June 16 for another shot at advancing to the June 18-20 finals.

At 136.5 lbs, **John Hughes of Minneapolis** emerged as the top seed from June 8. Whether Michael Pu‘u finished in the top six — or specifically 4th — and therefore competed at Allendale on June 16-20 is not yet confirmed. The full bracket results from June 8 have not yet been found.

The Family Account

It has been said within the family that **Michael won his heat** at the trials — that he performed at the level required to advance — and that the outcome was politically determined. The family account holds that **the spot was given to someone else over him**, and that race was a factor.

The documentary record currently confirms one match loss — to Desi McNelis, 12-0, in a round recorded by the Buffalo News. Whether Michael won earlier heats that same day, and whether his overall performance placed him in the top six who advanced to Michigan, remains an open question. The full bracket has not yet been located.

What is confirmed is that the Olympic spot ultimately went to Abdurrahim Kuzu — a recently naturalized Turkish-born athlete — through a closed-door selection process at a Michigan training camp. The family account is preserved here as living testimony, consistent with documented patterns of bias in amateur wrestling selection of that era, and worthy of further investigation. It is not contradicted by what the documentary record shows — it simply awaits fuller corroboration.

What the Historical Record Shows

The wrestler who represented the United States at the **1984 Los Angeles Olympics** in the Greco-Roman 136.5-pound (62 kg) class was **Abdurrahim Kuzu**.

Kuzu was born in İzmit, Turkey, and had previously competed internationally for Turkey, winning a **silver medal at the 1979 World Wrestling Championships**. He emigrated to the United States in the late 1970s and became a **naturalized U.S. citizen in 1983** — just one year before the Olympic trials. He competed for the University of Nebraska Omaha. At the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, Kuzu finished **fourth place**.

The selection of a recently naturalized athlete — one who had represented another nation at the World Championships just five years earlier — over American-born competitors, including a Native Hawaiian man from Goleta, California, raises documented and legitimate questions about the fairness and transparency of USA Wrestling's selection process in 1984.

The Controversy Around Kuzu's Selection and Performance

The questions around Kuzu do not end with his selection. A **UPI wire report dated August 1, 1984** — filed from the Olympics themselves in Anaheim, California — documents significant controversy surrounding Kuzu's matches at the Games:

Kuzu's bout against Canadian Doug Yeats was formally protested by Canada, who argued he had started too fast from the mat position and had not been duly warned for stalling. FILA officials

reviewed videotape of the match and **upheld the Canadian protest**, suspending the Turkish referee who had officiated. The American team then protested the reversal — but was overruled.

This pattern of disputed officiating decisions surrounding Kuzu — from the closed-door selection process through to the Olympic competition itself — is significant context for understanding the family account of Michael Pu‘u's experience.

Context: USA Wrestling Selection in 1984

The 1984 Olympic trials took place under the governance of **USA Wrestling**, which had only recently assumed control of Olympic team selection following a federal court order in 1982 removing the AAU. The organization had broad discretionary authority over team composition.

The 1984 Los Angeles Olympics were historically significant for U.S. wrestling. With the Soviet-led boycott decimating competition, the United States won an unprecedented **13 wrestling medals, including 9 gold**. It was the first year the U.S. won any medal in Greco-Roman wrestling. The pressure to field a strong, strategically chosen team was enormous — and the discretionary power to make those choices rested with a small number of officials.

Greco-Roman wrestling judging in this era was highly subjective. Decisions were rendered by judges, not purely by objective scoring, leaving significant room for bias — whether racial, political, or institutional.

Who Was Michael Pu‘u?

Michael Pu‘u was a Native Hawaiian man from the Pu‘u family, rooted in Goleta and the Santa Barbara, California area. He was the brother of ‘Iolani Pu‘u Kolenc (born Annette Marie Pu‘u), a choreographer, cultural organizer, and Traditional Hawaiian Cultural Practitioner.

High School Career — Dos Pueblos High School, 1971-1975

Michael Pu‘u was an elite wrestler from his earliest years. The full story was told in the **Santa Barbara News-Press, March 12, 1975**, in an article titled "Pueblos wrestlers have come a long way" by John Zant.

Dos Pueblos High School had only started its wrestling program four years earlier — and no team north of Redondo Beach had ever won a CIF Southern Section wrestling crown. The CIF championship covered all 400 schools in Southern California, across every division. Michael Pu‘u, Dan Bunke, and Gary Fischer changed that, winning the title at Fountain Valley High. **Mike Pu‘u was champion at 136 pounds.**

His record going into the state tournament was **35-2**. He won four more matches at state, finishing **3rd at the California State Finals** in Bakersfield with a final record of **39-4**. He was photographed defeating fellow CIF champion Fred Davis in an overtime bout, 14-4.

In that same season he recorded **152 takedowns** — missing the national high school record by just three. The record was 155, held by a North Dakota high school wrestler.

Coach Mike Hart called him "our most aggressive wrestler" — and in a moment of affection, "our pineapple king." An earlier midseason article described him as "21-1 against the best in the state" with 74 takedowns, and called him "a very aggressive wrestler."

The path to the CIF title was not easy. In the preliminary meet the week before, none of the Dos Pueblos wrestlers won all their matches. Hart "really jumped on Puu" in practice that week. In Michael's own words:

"He got me mad at myself. I don't think I would've won the CIF finals if he hadn't done that."

In the finals, he reversed a loss to Jeff Powell of Millikan, who had beaten him in the prelims. Hart said simply: "Puu just ripped the guy." Between Pu‘u and Bunke, they knocked off five unbeaten wrestlers on the way to their titles.

After the championship, Michael Pu‘u reflected on what the win meant — not just for himself, but for the team:

"Wrestling is an individual sport, but it took more than one guy, more than three, to win the title. It was a team effort. Everybody on the team was behind us."

The note on the clipped article, saved by his sister ‘Iolani, reads in Hawaiian: *"Ua ha'i 'o Hart 'O mo'i hala kahiki 'oia."*— "Hart said: He is the pineapple king." Followed by: **"Proud of you brother."**

He is listed among the **1975 CIF Southern Section Championship team members** for Dos Pueblos in the official CIF records.

Coaching Career — Bishop Diego High School, ~1980-1984

After his athletic career, Michael Pu‘u became **head wrestling coach at Bishop Diego** in the Santa Barbara area. A newspaper article headlined "Bishop wrestlers get serious / Dedication is the key" quotes coach Mike Puu extensively, showing his demanding but passionate coaching philosophy. He turned the program around, saying: "Last year we had 30 guys but a lot of them were goof-offs. I told the team I didn't care if we only had five guys, they were going to be dedicated. I didn't want 30 screw-ups."

College Career — Arizona State University & UC Santa Barbara, 1975-1980

After his championship high school career, Michael Pu‘u attended **Arizona State University**, then transferred to **UC Santa Barbara** for the 1976-77 season. His transfer was noted as significant news for the UCSB wrestling program. Coach Ed Swartz, who was building the Gaucho wrestling program, specifically named Michael's arrival as "one fine piece of news" for the team. An article in the Santa Barbara News-Press describes him as "former Dos Pueblos mat great Michael Puu" — confirming his reputation was already well established before he arrived.

At UCSB he joined former Dos Pueblos schoolmate and fellow wrestler Garry Fenske, who had placed 2nd in the California State championships for all college and university squads, and was named team captain for the 1976-77 season. Michael was part of what Coach Swartz was building into one of the strongest home schedules in UCSB wrestling history — competing against Arizona State, Cal Poly SLO, San Jose State, Oregon State, Oklahoma State, Oklahoma, UCLA, Oregon, and California.

He completed his college degree at UCSB, approximately 1976-1980, wrestling for the Gauchos throughout.

The Transition: Folkstyle to Greco-Roman, 1980-1984

Between his high school dominance and the 1984 Olympic trials, Michael Pu‘u had to complete his college degree — approximately 1976-1980 — and then undertake one of the most demanding transitions in wrestling: from folkstyle to Greco-Roman.

These are not the same sport. Folkstyle wrestling, which Michael dominated in high school, allows leg attacks, takedowns, and a full range of offensive moves. Greco-Roman wrestling allows none of that. It is entirely upper body — throws, clinch work, par terre. A wrestler who dominated folkstyle must essentially relearn the sport from the ground up.

According to wrestling coach and expert Shannyn Gillespie, this transition is one of the most challenging undertakings in the sport, requiring wrestlers to "learn, master, and apply" an entirely different set of skills. Most coaches never wrestle the Olympic styles themselves and cannot teach them. Training partners are hard to find. Most off-season Greco tournaments are "void of coaches" — meaning wrestlers largely have to coach themselves.

Michael Pu‘u made this transition while working as a high school wrestling coach at Bishop Diego. He was training himself, on his own time, with no institutional support, while simultaneously coaching the next generation. The approximately four years between finishing his degree and the 1984 trials represent years of disciplined, self-directed Greco-Roman development.

1984 U.S. Olympic Greco-Roman Wrestling Trials — Self-Represented, June 8, 1984

When Michael Pu‘u traveled to Minneapolis in June 1984 to compete at the U.S. Olympic Greco-Roman Wrestling Trials Final Qualifying Tournament, he did so representing himself — listed simply as "Goleta, Ca." in the results. No university, no military program, no sponsored athletic club behind him.

This stands in sharp contrast to many of his competitors. Abdurrahim Kuzu represented the University of Nebraska Omaha. John Hughes was backed by a Minneapolis wrestling club. David Ray had connections to Iowa City's wrestling infrastructure. Michael Puʻu came as an individual — a Native Hawaiian man from Goleta, a working high school coach, funding his own way, training on his own terms, having self-taught an entirely different style of wrestling over four years, competing at the national Olympic qualifying level nearly a decade after his high school dominance.

Expert wrestling coach Shannyn Gillespie writes that to compete into one's late twenties at the Olympic level requires "a long and prosperous career" built on careful planning and sustained dedication. Michael Puʻu did this without institutional support, without a college program behind him, without a club, without a sponsor. He did it by will.

His presence at the Final Qualifying Tournament of the U.S. Olympic Greco-Roman Wrestling Trials is a significant athletic achievement — one that has gone largely unrecorded in mainstream sports history.

Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander athletes have been systematically underrepresented in the historical record of American sport. Michael Puʻu's story is part of that larger pattern of erasure.

Questions for Further Research

The following questions remain open and are being actively investigated:

- What were the full bracket results for the 136.5-pound Greco-Roman class at the June 8, 1984 Final Qualifying Tournament in Minneapolis? Did Michael Puʻu finish in the top six and advance to the Michigan camp?
- Did Michael Puʻu win earlier heats that day, as the family account holds?
- Where exactly was the Michigan training camp held, and on what dates?
- What were the official selection criteria used at the Michigan camp to choose between competitors?
- What was the official selection process for Abdurrahim Kuzu, given his 1983 naturalization and prior representation of Turkey internationally?
- Were any protests or grievances filed by competitors passed over at the Michigan camp?
- Are there additional newspaper records from the Minneapolis Star Tribune, Los Angeles Times, or other outlets covering the June 8–9, 1984 trials and the subsequent Michigan camp?
- Does USA Wrestling retain records of the Michigan camp selection process from 1984?
- Did Michael Puʻu win any earlier heats at the June 8 Minneapolis tournament before losing to McNelis?
- What was his exact placement among all competitors at Minneapolis — i.e. how many wrestlers competed total at 136.5 lbs?
- Are there Grand Rapids Press or California newspaper records from June 16-21, 1984 documenting his participation at Allendale?

- What are the full results of the June 8 Minneapolis 136.5 lb bracket showing all placements?
- What was the full narrative around Kuzu's selection given the controversy that followed him to the Olympics?

Primary Source Documentation

Source	Description	Status
Goleta Sun, March 21, 1975	Awards banquet report: Michael Pu‘u named MVP and Outstanding Wrestler at Dos Pueblos sports banquet; confirms 13 varsity wrestlers, 11 league champions, 7 CIF finalists	**Confirmed — scan obtained via newspapers.com**
Santa Barbara News-Press, March 12, 1975, p. 11	Full account of Dos Pueblos CIF championship; Mike Pu‘u champion at 136 lbs, record 35-2 going into state; includes Michael's own words; clipped and annotated in Hawaiian by his sister ‘Iolani	**Confirmed — scan obtained via newspapers.com**
Santa Barbara News-Press, March 16, 1975	Live report from Bakersfield state finals: Pu‘u wins 4 consecutive matches after Friday loss; defeats previously unbeaten Jim Spangler 2-1 with takedown in last six seconds to finish 3rd; Dos Pueblos 10th in state, best showing by any Southern Section CIF team	**Confirmed — scan obtained via newspapers.com**
Newspaper clipping — "Wrestling coaches report successes"	Mike Puu described as Dos Pueblos star, 21-1 record, 74 takedowns, "very aggressive wrestler"	**Confirmed — scan obtained**
Newspaper clipping — "Chargers' Best Wrestlers" / state championships	Mike Puu, 39-4, Southern CIF champion, 3rd at state finals, 152 takedowns (3 shy of national record), photo defeating Fred Davis 14-4 in overtime	**Confirmed — scan obtained**
Goleta Sun, January 6, 1982, p. 6 — "Bishop wrestlers get serious / Dedication is the key"	Mike Puu quoted as head wrestling coach at Bishop Diego; philosophy, program building, athlete descriptions; five weeks after December 1981 coaches luncheon	**Confirmed — scan obtained via newspapers.com**
Dos Pueblos Alumni Night flyer, 2026	Mike Puu listed among 1975 CIF Southern Section Championship team members	**Confirmed — scan obtained**

Source	Description	Status
CIF-SS All-Time Individual Wrestling Champions record	Mike Puu, Dos Pueblos, listed 3rd place at 136 lbs, 1975	**Confirmed — official CIF record**
Sacramento Union, June 9, 1984, p. 34	Match result: McNelis dec. Pu‘u 12-0, 136.5 lb Greco-Roman	**Confirmed — scan obtained via newspapers.com**
Argus Leader, June 9, 1984	Confirms top 6 per weight class advanced to Michigan training camp; Olympic selection made at camp by coaches	**Confirmed — scan obtained via newspapers.com**
USA Wrestling official records	Full bracket and heat results, 1984 Final Qualifier; Michigan camp selection records	**Not yet obtained**
Minneapolis Star Tribune, June 9–10, 1984	Likely fuller results coverage including full 136.5 lb bracket	**Not yet searched**
Bay City Times, June 11, 1984, p. 18	Full top-six results from Minneapolis qualifying tournament; Michael Pu‘u not among top six at 136.5 lbs	**Confirmed — scan obtained via newspapers.com**
Clarion-Ledger, June 20, 1984, p. 38	Kuzu and Wasmund named winners at 136.5 lbs at Allendale finals	**Confirmed — scan obtained via newspapers.com**
Family oral testimony	Michael competed at national level; family account of political interference	**Living testimony — tournament record does not support claim of being passed over at trials**
Olympedia / Olympics.com	Abdurrahim Kuzu listed as 1984 US Olympic representative, 136.5 lb GR, 4th place	**Confirmed**
Grand Rapids Press, June 11, 1984	Official advertisement confirms full Allendale schedule: June 16 qualifying for 4th-place finishers, June 18-19 GR 136 lb preliminaries, June 20 finals	**Confirmed — scan obtained via newspapers.com**
Minneapolis Star Tribune, June 17, 1984	Confirms two-stage trial structure: Minneapolis seeding tournament → Grand Valley State College, Allendale, MI final trials; John Hughes top seed at 136 lbs	**Confirmed — scan obtained via newspapers.com**
UPI wire report, August 1, 1984	Documents controversy and protest surrounding Kuzu's match against Canada's Doug Yeats at the 1984 Olympics; Turkish referee suspended	**Confirmed**

Source	Description	Status
Santa Barbara News-Press, December 1, 1981	Coaches luncheon report: Michael Pu‘u confirmed as head wrestling coach at Bishop Diego; announces program moving to Class A; Mike Yamasaki noted as taking 6th at Greco-Roman Grand Nationals in Lincoln, Neb.	**Confirmed — scan obtained via newspapers.com**
Santa Barbara News-Press, ~1976	Reports Michael Pu‘u transferring from Arizona State to UCSB; described as "former Dos Pueblos mat great"; Coach Ed Swartz names his arrival as key news for Gaucho wrestling program	**Confirmed — scan obtained via newspapers.com**
Coach Shannyn Gillespie, "Transitioning to Freestyle or Greco-Roman Wrestling," coachshannyn.com	Expert context on the difficulty of folkstyle-to-Greco transition; self-coaching in off-season tournaments; career planning for competing into late twenties	**Confirmed — fetched May 2026**
California newspapers, June 19-23, 1984	Would confirm whether Michael Pu‘u traveled to Allendale for final trials	**Not yet searched**

A Note on Method

This archive entry follows the Lived Experience University practice of holding **oral family testimony alongside documentary evidence** — neither subordinating one to the other. The family account is not speculation. It is knowledge carried by people who were there, who witnessed, and who remembered. The absence of documentary corroboration does not diminish its truth; it reflects instead the systemic failure to document the experiences of Indigenous and racialized athletes.

This entry will be updated as additional documentation is gathered.

About the Submitter

‘Iolani Pu‘u Kolenc is on a medicine path.